

## **Folktales of the *huldufólk*: Their role and purpose in Icelandic cosmography**

Once, a young servant girl who was working outside was taken by the hand by a man she did not know. Saying that he means her no harm, he leads her to a farmhouse she has not seen before. In this house a woman is in childbirth, but cannot deliver her child without assistance from the servant girl. She does this successfully after which the man gives her a flask with a lotion to put on the eyes of the child, warning her not to get any of it in her own eyes. After doing this, she rubs one of her eyes with one of her fingers, and from then on, she is able to see the *huldufólk* – the hidden people. The man and the woman, who are in fact hidden people themselves, thank her and give her a fine piece of cloth and ensure her good fortune in the years to come. Some time later she goes to the market and sees the elf-man buying goods from an elf-merchant. The girl goes and greets the elf-man, but at this he puts his finger in his mouth and draws it across her eyes. After this, she is never again able to see the hidden people or any of their doings.

This tale of the elfin woman in childbirth and the human girl acting as a midwife is a well known tale in Iceland, Scandinavia, the British Isles and elsewhere<sup>1</sup>. Different versions of the story have been collected, with variations in narrative and outcome. In an Icelandic context, this motif first appears in the 14<sup>th</sup> century in *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* and from there it becomes common in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century. It was collected as a folktale in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by Jón Árnason, and is today published in various connections, among others in *Icelandic Folktales & Legends* by Jacqueline Simpson, from which this previous summation is based.

What makes this tale, and other tales of the same type, interesting? What are the reasons for their continuous popularity and distribution, and what can they tell us about the people and the society that continued to tell and retell them? In the following essay I will attempt to examine the historical role of the hidden people, the *huldufólk*, in Icelandic society through their appearance in selected folktales.

Before taking on such a task it is important to shed light on some of the aspects of this complex topic which will not be central to neither description nor analysis. This is primarily done in order to

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1 Simpson (2004): 33

emphasize the thematic boundaries of the essay, but will furthermore clarify the foundation and form the conceptual framework for the analytical points that will follow.

Though interesting in a bibliohistorical context, the origin, migration and collection of folktales in general and tales of the *huldufólk* in particular will not be of great significance in the following essay. Theories and discussions of the origin of these tales can be found in many works covering the subject<sup>2</sup>. In the same way, theories on the more far-reaching mythographical origins of the tales and legends found in Iceland will not be thoroughly discussed. For an interesting (and time-consuming) discussion on this matter I refer to some classical works on folklore and myth origin such as the writings of Max Müller, Stith Thompson and Hyacinthe Husson.

Conversely I will also not dwell on the contemporary attitudes towards the *huldufólk* in Iceland. Recent surveys show that Icelanders to a large degree still hold the *huldufólk* as a part of not only shared mythology and topic of children stories, but as a continuing part of their belief, although not necessarily expressed actively<sup>3</sup>. This contemporary aspect of folk belief will not be relevant to my analysis.

So, as implied above, the following essay will only to a small extent deal with the diachronistic aspects of the subject in question. Rather, a synchronic approach will be utilized in order to get the fullest understanding of the close ties that seem to exist between folktales, belief, cosmography and sociality.

After having marked the constraints of this essay, what do we have left? What is interesting about this topic is not so much the stories and the beliefs connected to them in and for themselves rather than the role they have played in shaping the lives of people. The performative elements of systems of belief have a tremendous power in the way societies have developed and how elements of culture are reproduced, and, in a methodological sense, folktales can be a valuable window into the inner workings of this. This is based on the presupposition that folktales are more than just tales, in the sense that they have a significance and purpose outside of only being means of entertainment. The fact that they have been told and retold throughout time could suggest this, and the ambition of the following essay will be to both assert this presupposition, map the ties between folktale and folk-belief and analyze the role that both tale and belief have played in the society and the cosmography of Icelandic people in the past.

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2 See for example Sveinsson (2003)

3 Hafstein (2000): 87

## Huldufólk

The huldufólk, “the hidden people” were previously known as *álfar*, “elves”. While the word *álfar* can be found in myriads of older Norse writings, the term huldufólk is today the most commonly used name for the beings which are said to reside within mounds, knolls, rocks, hillocks and other characteristic features of the surrounding nature. They share characteristics with similarly described creatures in Scandinavia, and are also comparable to the fairies of Celtic tradition. The term huldufólk was first recorded in the 14<sup>th</sup> century<sup>4</sup>, and it has been argued that the shift from *álfar* to huldufólk is connected to the development or transformation of the conceptualization of these creatures. Originally thought to be somewhat angelic or superhuman beings, this notion gradually transformed into the current notion of the *álfar* as being hidden people who share most characteristics with their human counterparts. It has been argued that this change among other things could be credited to the adoption of Christianity. Both their properties and given name changed to reflect the new reality: that they were people who were hidden.

Since this analysis is based on their depiction in folktales, it is the latter conception of the elves which henceforth will be discussed.

The reason as to why they had to stay hidden can be found in the tales of their origin. One tale explains how the elves were once children of Adam and Eve which they were too embarrassed to show God. God therefore proclaimed: “*That which had to be hidden from Me, shall also be hidden from men.*” Another tale explains how they once were angels who chose not to take sides when the Devil raised a revolt against God in Heaven. They were therefore driven down to earth where they were to live in knolls, hills and rocks.

In contrast to the Celtic and Scandinavian concept of elves or fairies, the Icelandic huldufólk are always of full human size. They might only differ from human beings by some small detail, for example a ridge instead of a groove in the upper lip, or the absence of any division between the nostrils<sup>5</sup>. Their being nearly indistinguishable from human beings is an important point, the implications of which will be discussed later.

## Behavior

The behavior and social organization of the huldufólk could be seen as a reflection of human

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4       Hastrup (1990): 262

5       Simpson (2004): 15

society. They would work the land, raise families, celebrate holidays, keep livestock and partake in Christian rituals. In some tales they are said to have a king or a queen, though these stories are not as common as those which depict them as being equal to their human counterparts. Equal should in this context be understood as equality in way of living – not equality in power or capabilities. They are able to reveal themselves and their dwellings to humans if they wish to do so, but ordinarily they are not seen.

In one tale where this is illustrated, a human farmer is on his way home from fishing at the fishing grounds by the sea when he sees a stranger whose horse has fallen in the bog. The farmer helps the stranger retrieve his horse, after which the stranger introduces himself as the man's neighbor. As a token of his gratitude the neighbor gives him a piece of advice: *“You need never again make a useless journey down to the sea, on the one condition that you never go down before you see me go.”* For three years the man follows his neighbor's advice, until one day where fishing conditions seem perfect, and everyone else go straight down to the sea, except for the man's neighbor. Being impatient the farmer goes down to the sea, only to discover that all boats have left. That day all boats were lost in an unexpected storm. The same night the farmer has a dream in which his neighbor says: *“You can thank me for one good thing at least, that you did not put out to sea today! But because you set out without having seen me, you need never wait here for me again, as I don't mean to let you see me again, now that you didn't follow my advice.”*

Also common are the tales of elves leaving changelings in place of unguarded human children, elves helping people with the expectation of a favor in return, and stories of huldufólk and humans falling in love, and even having children, with one another.

These patterns of behavior mirror human behavior in the sense that the huldufólk also are driven by motives and patterns that resonate with human behavior. Though the actions elicited by these motives might be considered exaggerated or morally dubious, they nonetheless follow basic patterns of human interaction: retribution, gratitude, respect and reciprocity. This can be seen in contrast to the chaotic, unpredictable, arbitrary or taboo-defiling “in-human” behavior displayed by other supernatural beings such as the trolls, who could eat human flesh, or the undead *draugar*, who could turn on their masters<sup>6</sup>. Though the huldufólk in various stories occupy the antagonistic position in the narrative, they are conceptually far from the “evil” antagonists we find in older wonder tales, who do harm for the sake of doing harm, or who are inherently malicious and therefore meet their inevitable demise at the climax of the story.

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6 Hastrup (2004): 260

## Folktales

In order to properly and fruitfully utilize folktales methodologically in the area of historical cosmography it is crucial to explain their characteristics, their inner workings. At the same time, precaution must be taken in order to not fall into the essentialist trap of defining the object of study as nothing more than its characteristics or as the sum of its parts. Academic pursuit through the looking glass of essentialism can also lead to an unfortunate blindness to the intricate effects and connections that objects and phenomena can have or elicit in the milieu in which they are found. The following section describes selected approaches to folktales, and will, in the limited space available, attempt to deconstruct these approaches and the folktales themselves, thus allowing a closer look at their relation to belief and worldview.

One of the earliest most canonical and influential works on the matter of folktales is *Morphology of the Folktale* by the Russian scholar Vladimir Propp. In the section “On the History of the Problem” Propp critically scrutinizes different types of folktale-classification with the goal of obtaining a system, which could compare to the methods of classification used within the fields of zoology and botany. The general problems concerning the establishment of a system of classification had, according to Propp, not been resolved due to the fact that the laws and rules which control the internal development of these tales still required closer examination. The intention with this examination was to establish the components of a morphology, meaning a description of the folktale in regards to its distinct components, the internal links between these components and the relation between the components and the whole. Propp describes these distinct components as functions. The definitional content of a function is often given as a verb which expresses some kind of action or acting, for example flight, departure, flight or arrival. The action is also determined by which point in the narrative it appears. Based on this concept of function Propp establishes four basic theses which frames his analysis of the 31 functions he describes in his work:

1. *Functions of characters serve as stable, constant elements in a tale, independent of how and by whom they are fulfilled. They constitute the fundamental components of a tale.*
2. *The number of functions known to the fairy tale is limited.*
3. *The sequence of functions is always identical.*
4. *All fairy tales are of one type in regard to their structure.*<sup>7</sup>

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7 Propp (1968): 21

Far from all 31 functions are relevant in the context of Icelandic folktales about elves, and neither is Propp's notion of the eight distinct character types to be found in folktales. Most of the Icelandic folktales selected for this purpose are shorter and depict fewer characters than their Russian counterparts, though several important points from *Morphology of the Folktale* can be used. First and foremost, the notion of analytically breaking down the folktales to their smallest components makes for a remarkable tool of further exploration of their significance. In terms of analyzing the previously mentioned tale of the fisherman and his elfin neighbor, the unreflected reception of the tale as it is told, makes for great entertainment; yet in order to utilize the tale to its full potential in a larger context, the deconstruction is necessary and facilitates its implementation in the fields of historical, anthropological and ethnological analysis.

Propp's analysis has rightfully been criticized on different accounts, two of which are especially relevant to this essay. Firstly, Propp's analysis neglects all verbal and communicative aspects of the folktale, the form of which is almost always oral. Considerations of mood, tone and style are absent, and so are considerations on how the tales are transmitted. Secondly, Propp's reduction of folktales to a series of functions fails to have much use in further studies without reworking. This reworking and development was done by Claude Lévi-Strauss among other people, and brought the tales and myths into the realm of anthropology. According to Lévi-Strauss, to understand a culture, the anthropologist should look for an elementary grammar of mythological *thinking* – not narrating. This was a consequence of the structuralist school of thought of which Lévi-Strauss was a central figure. The main difference between the Russian formalism, represented by Propp, and structuralism consists in the matter of the investigation and understanding of structure.

*"For structuralism there is no such difference between the form and the content: there is no such category of abstract, on one hand, and a category of the concrete, on the other. The form and the content have one and the same nature and therefore they both undergo to the analysis."*<sup>8</sup>

It is at this point we can start to formulate ideas about the link between folktales and folk-belief. With the structuralist inclusion of the mind which invents, narrates and retells the tale, Propp's functions become more than just components of the disassembled. One problem that the

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8 Lévi-Strauss (1960): 16

structuralist approach has in regards to this particular topic is its insistence on universality. As Lévi-Strauss proclaimed on the paradox of the mythical:

*“On one hand it would seem that in the course of a myth anything is likely to happen. (...) But on the other hand, this apparent arbitrariness is belied by the astounding similarity between myths collected in widely different regions. Therefore the problem: If the content of myth is contingent, how are we to explain the fact that myths throughout the world are so similar?”*<sup>9</sup>

Without dwelling too long on the implications of structuralist thought, it is important to formulate questions which can address the apparent universality of mythical tales without reducing them to merely functions of the mind, and consequently the universality of human biology. There are arguably practical-communicative factors that play in as well, and these will be discussed shortly. This is where the unicity of the Icelandic folktales come into play – would a story like *The Elfin Fisherman*<sup>10</sup>, as it was told here, come to be anywhere but Iceland? Though stories about changelings can be found in various parts of the world, would a story specifically about avoiding an elfin changeling by means of cross marks, as it happens in *Let Us Take Him!*<sup>11</sup>, make sense outside of Iceland? Having applied the insight gained by both deconstructing and universalizing the folktale, these other factors can now be brought into consideration. The psychological and the practical are two aspects that to a large degree is dependent on the individual. In order to have the fullest understanding of the individual, a description of the environment of the individual is necessary: Christian, pre-industrial Iceland.

## **Cosmography**

The nature that surrounded the Icelanders in the times before the folktales were collected is to a large extent unaltered to this day. The man-made structures that predominates the landscape outside of the cities today are mostly roads, power-lines and fencing, with farmhouses scattered around the landscape. It is clear today that the landscape to a large degree still dictates how and where humans can manifest their impact. Mountains do not move easily.

Though it is relatively easy to imagine how the natural environment looked 300 years ago, it is important to question the intuitive dichotomy between nature and culture. As Kirsten Hastrup

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9 Lévi-Strauss (1958): 208

10 Simpson (2004)

11 Simpson (2004)

rightly points out:

*“Although the Icelanders lived in a space which obviously had certain objective physical characteristics, these did not themselves constitute the environment; they were, rather, conceptually molded by people, who thus defined the significant qualities of their space.”<sup>12</sup>*

That the space is constructed by humans is especially evident in the dense layers of meaning which can be read from the place-names in Iceland. Naturally, the physical environment sets certain boundaries for human action, and when discussing folktales it is good to keep unicity of the relevant location in mind. But very much in line with the structural anthropology of Lévi-Strauss, Hastrup's description of old Icelandic conceptualization of nature and space is much concerned with drawing boundaries, for example between themselves and their environment, between the inside and the outside, and between the controlled and the uncontrolled<sup>13</sup>. This is what Lévi-Strauss called “binary oppositions”, the construction of which he argues is a universal feature of the human mind<sup>14</sup>.

In the study of huldufólk, the oppositional notions of inside/outside and controlled/uncontrolled are highly relevant. In an insightful section, Hastrup describes the hidden dimension of the Icelandic environment, a notion which is intimately linked to the idea of binary oppositions. To the Icelandic people of the time, the hidden dimension was as real as the mountains and fjords that surrounded them. Different kind of beings would reside in this hidden dimension, some of the most prominent being the huldufólk. Given their appearance and behavior, which was described earlier, the part of the hidden dimension where huldufólk lived was the proximate space. Being so akin to humans, they mirrored human society, but in a distinct world, entrance points to which could be found in places where the wild broke through the cultivated surface.

### **An additional useful perspective: Practicality**

There is one additional useful perspective which will be included in this analysis: Practicality. Practicality is in this context defined as the actual transmission and spread of a certain tale. In 1967, structuralistically inclined literary theorist Roland Barthes published the essay *The Death of the Author*, which argued that writing and creator are unrelated phenomena<sup>15</sup>. This might seem intuitively true in the case of folktales, since these by definition do not have an ascribed author. Yet,

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12 Hastrup (1990): 244

13 Hastrup (1990): 247

14 Lévi-Strauss (1955)

15 Barthes (1967)



in terms of practicality, it is precisely the oral folktale which cannot be separated from the individual who is telling it. Therefore, the *act of telling* the folktale becomes pivotal in its continued existence. The intricate theories of how general information is transmitted will not be dealt with here, but in the work *Lore*, Munro S. Edmonson addresses the issue of the transmission of lore. He argues that the transmission of lore (not only meaning folktales but also beliefs, understood as a logical conceptual structure) should be dealt with in terms of communicative patterns with an emphasis on the role of the individual<sup>16</sup>. This is an important point seeing that it is nearly impossible to separate the *hows* and *whys* of the telling of folktales, disregarding their current state as cultural relics in romanticized anthologies. This is closely related to the study of the spread of folk-beliefs, but as previously mentioned this will only be dealt with in passing, taking into account the unicity and apparent consistency of the Icelandic folk-beliefs throughout the past centuries. It is this connection between the individual and the framework of society that is the analytical point of dissecting the folktales and the way they are told. As Anna-Leena Siikala states:

*“Narrative practices, narrators, genre, strategy for performance, interpretation conventions and so on provide a framework for understanding and recreating legends.”*<sup>17</sup>

### Connecting the dots

Hafstein argues that the elves represent nature in the heart of culture<sup>18</sup>. This can to some degree be considered true, keeping in mind Hastrup's points on their dwellings in the landscape in close proximity to the humans, but his statement is similarly part of the anachronistic discourse of the currently prevailing nature/culture dichotomy. In the lives of the Icelanders, the *huldufólk* didn't necessarily act as representatives for anything – they were merely a part of the cosmography and everyday life.

In the discussions of the representativeness of the *huldufólk*, Freudian psychological terms could be employed, but this approach is based on the presupposition that universal fears or taboos are reflected in the psyche of the individual. While this presupposition might very well be true (as could be indicated by the universality of the functions of the folktales and the structuralist conception of the mind) it does not fully account for the establishment or reproduction of socially constructed cosmographies. As shown, these constructs are socially mediated, and it can therefore be argued that the folk-beliefs (which would be seen as fixed or given in a structuralist view) have been

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16 Edmonson (1971): 16

17 Siikala (2008): 39

18 Hafstein (2000): 89

prevalent throughout the centuries by means of cultural communication rather than being a natural result of inherent human conditions specific to Iceland.

The fact that the elfin society closely mirrors the human society, and that they to a large degree act according to human sensibilities, gives the transmission of huldafólk-folktales a purpose in the realm of the social. Some tales might be told as cautionary tales, transmitting social advice about not to leave your child unattended, risking it being swapped for a changeling. The stories of impossible love between huldafólk and humans might be allegorical, explaining and emphasizing the social constraints of interpersonal relations. Tales of children being punished by the huldafólk for their greed serve as potent lectures on right and wrong, while simple stories of the consequences of breaking a promise to an elfin neighbor is a parable to illustrate a small moral lesson.

These examples highlight the individual use of the tales in a social context. On the other hand, this social context must be seen in a broader perspective in terms of culture and the cosmography linked to it. As Siikala states:

*“Legends are (...) mirrors of a cultural system, even if they as individual narratives reflect different aspects of world view and human experience.”*<sup>19</sup>

This, in essence, captures the intricate relationship between the individual and the social, the mythical and the cultural, through a methodology of the folktale. The folktales offer a glimpse into the world of the individual as well as the society of the past, and by deconstructing their narrative into universal *functions*, relating the functions to *thinking*, adding the *sociality of the practical* while keeping in mind the specifics of history and topography, the role and purpose of these folktales can be fruitfully examined.

This pursuit might bear resemblance to the hypothesis of Jakob Grimm from 1835, proposing that the folktales being told by “the common people” were the key to reconstructing, in his particular case Germanic, mythology and prehistoric culture<sup>20</sup>. This is not the aspirations of this essay. The analysis presented in this paper merely proposes viewing the folktales in terms of function and purpose for *people*, rather than a mean of reconstructing the mythology of *a people*.

Interestingly enough, today it could seem that the tales do serve a purpose of recollecting a national past, representing an anti-modernity attitude. This is further described in Hafstein's writing on elves today; how they, unlike their human counterparts, always will reside in the mythical hidden

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19 Siikala (2008): 39

20 Simonson (1985): 39

universe of the past.<sup>21</sup>

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21 Hafstein (2000)

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